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Covert War Songs Revealed

By Thomas O'Toole

In apparent violation of U.S. copyright laws, the wartime Office of Strategic Services translated popular American songs into German without the songwriters' knowledge, then played the recordings over clandestine radio broadcasts beamed from Great Britain into Germany designed to boost the American way and undermine the German way of life.

The OSS translated the most popular songs of the 1940s, even rewriting the lyrics to suit their propaganda goals. In total secrecy, they used European-born opera singers and Hollywood stars of German origin to record the songs, most notably cabaret singers Lotte Lenya and Marlene Dietrich.

The person the OSS used to orchestrate and arrange the songs to suit the German personality was Kurt Weill, the husband of Lenya and German-born composer (with playwright Bertolt Brecht) of "The Threepenny Opera." Weill also composed the Broadway musicals "Street Scene," "Lost in the Stars," "Lady in the Dark," and "Knickerbocker Holiday."

The OSS also secretly used the New York advertising agency J.

OSS Rewrote Pop Tunes In Propaganda Ploy

Walter Thompson to recruit musicians to back up the singers on its clandestine recordings without the knowledge of the American Federation of Musicians. At the height of the war with the Germans, during the summer of 1944, the OSS was making as many as eight recordings a week of complete Broadway shows and the hit songs of the day.

The revelations are contained in a handful of more than 15,000 documents released this week by the National Archives after being declassified last spring by the CIA, which succeeded the OSS as the nation's intelligence service after World War II. A single stack of all the newly released documents representing OSS wartime activities would be more than 194 feet high.

Among the works recorded by the OSS were songs that are still popular—hits like "I Told Every Little Star," "I'll Get By," "My Heart Stood Still" and "Is You Is or Is You Ain't." The Broadway show tunes translated, rewritten and recorded by the OSS included songs from shows by the Gershwins, Rodgers and Hart, Cole Porter, Jerome Kern and Irving Berlin.

From the released documents, it is clear that the overriding concern of

the OSS was the apparent violation of U.S. copyright laws in not seeking the songwriters' consent to reproduce their work. Memos constantly worried about "copyright violations." One memo from an OSS bureaucrat in Washington to the head of its New York office said flatly that only Marlene Dietrich was to be trusted enough to be told everything that was going on, but even she "must be cautioned to be most discreet in connection with the copyrights."

Using a man known only as "Metzyl" to rewrite most of the songs into German, the OSS was desperate to find new talent to help in the rewriting at the peak of its project in August 1944. Says one memo: "Metzyl can no longer sustain the pace of eight new lyrics a week. He has done nobly so far but if we are to produce eight or more songs a week for the rest of the war he will have to have help."

Of all the artists it used, the OSS clearly loved Dietrich the most. In a letter written Aug. 24, 1944, from Washington to OSS officer David Williamson in New York, OSS officer Edward Cushing says: "Dietrich is the only one of our artists who, so far as I know, has been told for whom she is working but even she has not been told the nature of the operations in which she is engaged. I urge you to bear it in mind."